DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 467 258 FL 801 524

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TITLE	Reflective Questioning in the Program Evaluation Process.
PUB DATE	2002-07-00
NOTE	7p.
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adult Education; *English (Second Language); *Questioning Techniques; *Second Language Instruction; Self Evaluation (Individuals); Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS	*Reflective Inquiry; *Reflective Thinking

ABSTRACT

This paper explains how to use reflective questioning in adult English-as-a-Second-Language classes, describing how one teacher spends about 30 minutes at the end of every 3-month session asking learners to reflect on the work they and their teachers have been doing. Tips for reflecting with adult ESL students include the following: give the learners time to gather their thoughts, depersonalize this very personal process, help learners acknowledge their biases from the start, help learners set points of reference, ask reasonable and focused questions and be realistic about the responses, and make reflection a regular activity. Suggestions for beginning the process include providing an activity or time for learners to focus their attention on the time period in question and allowing them to gather their thoughts (e.g., creating practice tests for one another on material covered or brainstorming on what they studied). Sample questions for drawing out information after the students have prepared focus on whether they have studied English before, what they thought the English class would be like, which topics they are studying that are really valuable to their lives, and what they would change if they could. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education) (SM)

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Reflective Questioning in the Program Evaluation Process

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July 3, 2002

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Aristotle once said that the unexamined life is not worth living. I try to make that spirit part of my work in adult ESL. As a teacher, I have always tried to incorporate reflection in my classes, asking learners to reflect on what we do in class and to self-reflect on how they see their own performances. Since becoming the administrator of a small community-based volunteer adult ESL program, it has been a little more difficult. However, I have tried to incorporate reflective processes in the data gathering that I do when I evaluate our program.

At the end of every three-month session, I visit each class in our program and spend about thirty minutes asking learners to reflect on the work they and their teachers have been doing. I give them a set of reflective questions; they consider them individually; and then we discuss them as a group. I take notes and then incorporate the notes in the overall program review process, which also includes observations and data from teachers. With beginning level classes, I do this information gathering in Spanish (100% of our beginning learners are native Spanish speakers); with advanced classes, we do it in English. It is always an engaging and enlightening process for me, one that constantly reminds me that reflection is not a foreign concept to adult learners, even if they may not have all the language they need to discuss it in English or if at times they need some assistance keeping the process on track.

Working through reflective questioning and discussions with the learners spurs me to reflect not only on our program, but also on the process that I am using to gather data. I have held reflective conversations with learners four or five times now. Recently, I sat down to look over my accumulated notes and thoughts and realized that I have learned a few helpful points about reflecting with learners.

Give the learners time to gather their thoughts

Preparation and warm-up is the first step in any good lesson plan and it is no different with reflective processes. There is great value in giving learners an opportunity to gather their thoughts before they start reflecting. Usually, as the administrator "borrowing" class time for this reflective data gathering, I didn't have the luxury of giving learners time to

warm up and focus on what they been doing in their classes during the time period in question. However, as this small program's de facto substitute, I occasionally had two-hour blocks of time in which to work with the learners. In these cases, I had the opportunity to build in warm-up activities and I saw how much they facilitated the process. With a chance to reassemble their memories of and reactions to the time period in question, as well as time to create a framework for the reflective questions to follow, the process became much more efficient.

Depersonalize a very personal process

It does not help the reflective process when you get personal, either in question or in the discussions that result from questions. When I included a question that asked for feedback on the teachers and what the did in the classroom, some learners obviously did not want to appear critical of their teachers. Others were quite blunt in stating their opinions, creating discomfort and potential bad feelings. Either can derail the process. You can't completely control how this process—which involves opinions, emotions, and a wide variety of personalities—will progress. however, you can lay some positive groundwork. When constructing question s that will involve some degree of opinion in the response, it is a good idea to steer as clear as possible from the personal and focus on description rather than judgment. For example, rather than asking a question that seems to focus on the teacher (e.g., "What has your teacher done that really works? What hasn't worked?"), try focusing questions on less personal elements such as activities or aspects of textbooks (e.g., "Describe an activity or situation when you felt confused or disconnected. Describe an activity when you felt very excited, like you were really learning.") While I found that opinions and judgments still emerged, I also found there was richer data for analysis and evaluation and less negativity and criticism.

Help learners acknowledge their biases from the start

A big part of successful reflection is knowing when personal expectations and preferences are coloring actions and reactions. That can be difficult. If learners are asked to express expectations and preferences at the beginning of the reflective

process, it drew out information that often helped me to help them clarify points or prompt new understanding of strong statements made later.

Help learners set points of reference

Adult learners come to the classroom with banks of knowledge and experiences, and their learning processes usually involve incorporation of new information into existing knowledge structures. Asking them to relate their current experience to experiences that they have already had and upon which they may have already reflected can facilitate new reflection. Rather than asking "What do you think of your classes now?", help them establish a reference point from the past that can serve as a mark for relcting upon and evaluating their current experiences.

Ask reasonable, focused questions and be realistic about responses

Asking for reasonable responses sounds like an obvious point, but in my enthusiasm to create reflective questions that asked learners to be practive in their resonses, I at times offered them the proverbial blank sheet and said "Write something." it was overwhelming and I usually got responses that were as vague as my question. I began to think about the responses I hoped to get and whether or not learners would have the ready information, perspective, and time to make them. That helped me move away from generalized or potentially all-encompassing questions (*"What do you need to study for your life?")* and ask focused questions that directed their attention to specific issues or actions in their classrooms.

Make reflection a regular activity

Reflection is by nature a regular, ongoing process. It loses some of its power if it is infrequent. I felt this very keenly and I chafed under the limitations of access that my position as administrator, rather than classroom teacher, placed on me. While I don't discount the information that I gathered, I realized that doing this type of questioning and discussion on an ongoing basis would have produced even richer data. Also, the learners would have been more accustomed to the process. Also, when reflection is done on a regular basis, learners have a manageable period of time with which to work.

Asking learners to think back over an extended period of time is difficult; insights become impressions when too much time has passed.

Reflection can be infectious. I find that the more I use it, well, the more I use it! It's an important activity, one that is valuable in all aspects of life. Using it in the classroom is just one more extension of that. It's certainly not something that is unfamiliar to learners. They may need help with the language to express their opinions and experiences or guidance in moving through the reflective process in this specific context, but they welcome the opportunity to exercise these thought processes and offer their opinions and evaluations.

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Following are some of the suggestions and specific questions that have emerged for me as I developed this process. Teachers may be able to use these suggestions to create their own reflective questioning processes for their classes.

To begin the process, provide an activity or time for the learners to focus their attention on the time period in question and gather their thoughts:

- Ask the learners to place post-it notes in their books on the five or six pages that were most important to them during the period in question.
- Have small groups create practice tests for one another on the material they covered during that time.
- Have small groups or the whole group brainstorm on what they studied.
- Give learners a writing prompt and ask them to do a quick write in response to it.

After the learners have had an opportunity prepare, you can use the following questions to draw out information:

1. Have you studied English before? How were the classes similar to ours? How were they different?

2. When you started classes, what did you think English class would be like? What did you think you would learn and be able to do when you finished? Is that what your English class has been like? What has been different?

3. Which topics are you studying that are really valuable to your life? Which aren't? Name two situations in your life that you need more English for.

4. Describe an activity when you felt confused or disconnected. Describe an activity when you felt excited, like you were learning.

5. If you could change one thing in class, what would it be? What one thing would you not want to change?

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